Imperial Citizenship in Late Colonial India

Nationalist teleologies often result in the erasure of significant moments and movements, because the latter do not fit within the grand narrative of the nation that tends to become the dominant version of history. This is the case with that moment in the history of late colonial India that is associated with the rise of so-called Moderate nationalism. The dominant Indian historiography tends to treat it, if not as a total failure, at best as an incomplete attempt that timidly opened the path leading to the truly realized historical form of the nation, the advent of which is often linked with Mahatma Gandhi’s rise to the leadership of the Indian nationalist movement. But Gandhi himself, as is well known but often forgotten, did pass through a lengthy phase when he was a believer not in Indian nationalism, but in imperial citizenship as the way for Indians to acquire political rights within the framework of a British Empire he then thought fundamentally benevolent. Such an aspiration to a form of putative citizenship could however be invented within the context of the late Victorian British Empire is a point about which the author elaborates in a lengthy introduction that succeeds in defining a framework for analysis that avoids some of the pitfalls of the postcolonial paradigm.

The first chapter, “Of the Indian Economy and the English Polls,” is a really original take on one of Indian nationalism’s founding fathers, Dadabhai Naoroji, and on his seminal critique of the political economy of colonial India, Poverty and Un-British Rule in India (1901). Treating it as a literary text rather than the scientific treatise it purports to be, Banerjee is able to show its kinship to the genre of the gothic novel, which was then flourishing in Victorian Britain. Although the parallel tends at times to somewhat stretch the imagination of the reader, it proves nevertheless heuristically rewarding as the author brings out the similarity between the dismembered body of the Indian nation conjured up by Dadabhai in his analysis of the profoundly dysfunctional economic relationship between metropolis and colony and the grotesquerie and gloom characteristic of gothic novels. The link to the no-
tion of imperial citizenship is established through a fairly detailed study of Dadabhai's two campaigns for a seat in the British Parliament as a Liberal MP on an Irish Home League ticket, which resulted, at his second attempt in 1892, in his election for Finsbury Central, the first time a "coloured" person was elected to a seat in the British Parliament. Often treated in the existing historiography of Britain and India as a kind of "freak," the episode is nevertheless worth reflecting about, for the deep paradoxes it reveals about the notion of citizenship as it evolved in the late nineteenth century both in the imperial metropolis and in the Indian colony. For Dadabhai, who was elected to a parliamentary seat in Britain, would not even have been allowed to vote in his native India. To a tiny elite of cosmopolitan and mobile Indians, the empire offered a path to citizenship that India still refused them. But the small size of the group involved must not lead to the conclusion that the move and the aspirations were insignificant, and that their de facto erasure from the historical record is justified.

Similar erasure threatens Gandhi's twenty-year fight for the rights of South African Indians within the British Empire, often reduced, in biographical accounts, to a simple rehearsal for Gandhi's future role as liberator of India. In the second chapter, "South Africa, Indentured Labor and the Question of Credit," the author returns to this often-studied episode with a view to showing the many ambiguities of the future Mahatma's position, in particular in relation to the indentured laborers who formed the majority of the Indian population of the colony of Natal. I found this chapter the least convincing in the book, because treating Gandhi's South African twenty-odd year stay as a whole, without paying enough attention to the gradual evolution in the future Mahatma's thought and action, leads to a flattening of certain dilemmas that he faced. In spite of what literary analysis can tell us about the "spectral" presence of the indentured laborers in Gandhi's discourse from the time of his arrival in Durban, there is little doubt that they did not figure prominently in his agenda before the last phase of his stay in South Africa. Their status as "imperial citizens" was far from being a priority for Gandhi, a critique that could also be extended to the future Mahatma's attitude toward South African blacks. Late recognition of their worth was largely linked to Gandhi's "discovery" of the eminent dignity of manual labor in the writings of Russian populists, such as Yuri Vasilyevich Bondarev (and Leo Tolstoi), a linkage that is not sufficiently emphasized. The discussion of Gandhi's view on "credit" also suffers from insufficient attention to his own background as a member of a merchant caste. In this chapter, a certain lack of familiarity with the historical and sociological context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Africa (thus the author appears unaware of the fact that in the 1890s, the South African Republic was a Boer state and not a British colony), as well as a neglect of certain traits of the Gujarati merchant culture in which Gandhi had been steeped, make for a somewhat unsatisfactory treatment of Gandhi's very idiosyncratic trajectory.

By contrast, the method of literary criticism employed to good effect by the author in the first chapter proves again its worth in the third chapter, "The Professional Citizen in/and the Zenana," which looks at a famous autobiographical text by India's first female lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji, India Calling: The Memoirs of Cornelia Sorabji (1934). Recasting "professionalism" as a crucial idiom for articulating citizenship without the nation (as Sorabji remained an empire loyalist till the end of her life), the text offers a balanced account of a fascinating and atypical career. Denied official recognition as a lawyer because of her gender, Sorabji found a specific niche for herself as a legal adviser to pardinashin women (women kept in the seclusion of purda) with the Court of Wards, a role she assumed with considerable success. Allowed unlimited access to the zenana (women's inner apartments), which was of course a forbidden space for male lawyers, she did not use the knowledge gained to develop and publicize a systematic critique of the condition of women in India, but pursued a piecemeal ameliorative strategy, which left her in a kind of limbo vis-à-vis emancipatory narratives recently developed by Indian feminists. Somewhat distancing herself from feminist discourse and avoiding facile censure, Banerjee is able to use Sorabji's largely self-chosen liminality to good effect to undermine some of the ambiguities of the project of imperial citizenship, and its complex relationship to issues of gender and race.

The fourth and last chapter, "Modernity and the Indian Civil Service," deals with one of the major demands of "moderate" politicians, the admission of Indians to the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the "steel-frame" of the British Raj, a much-coveted badge of imperial citizenship of a kind. It does it through a double movement of examining a leading moderate's autobiography, Surendranah Banerjee's A Nation in the Making (1925), and of looking at the figure of the "competition-wallah" through a presentation of two now largely forgotten literary texts produced in England, G. O. Trevelyan's The Competition-Wallah (1866) and H. S. Cunningham's Chronicles of Dustypore
Counterposing Banerjia’s trajectory that led him to be the first Indian to have successfully passed the ICS examination to a study of the way in which the “new” British ICS officers, those who had entered the service after the institution of a competitive examination in 1853, were perceived, offers a way of going beyond the “binaarism” that has too often dominated studies of colonial India. Both the “effeminate” Bengalis, who represented the majority of Indian aspirants to the ICS, of whom Banerjia was a representative, and the “unmanly” middle-class British “competition-wallahs” were judged by dominant voices in Anglo-India to lack in “character” and virility, those essential attributes of the Victorian gentleman, who served as the ideal type for both the citizen and the bureaucrat. Thus the difference between Indian and Briton was partly erased in the censure exercised by the dominant “gendered” language of Victorian officialdom against all who did not conform to its ideal of muscular masculinity. Those thus indicted reacted by emphasizing their own masculinity, be it Banerjia detailing his physical exertions in his memoirs, or Desvoeux, the “competition-wallah” character in the Chronicles of Dustypore, flirting with the main female character. Their similar rejection points basically to a global unease in the way the Victorians dealt with aspects of bureaucratic modernity and their lingering nostalgia for some kind of “feudal” values.

All in all, the book brings into focus the way in which “imperial citizenship” could be an ideal inspiring individual careers, but failed to make the transition to becoming a viable political program. Such failure need not be interpreted however only in negative terms, for the measure of cosmopolitanism the “imperial citizenship” phase injected into Indian political discourse proved of some value in limiting the “nativist” excesses of the full-blown nationalism that flourished in the following phase of India’s history. As the author underlines in her conclusion, recovering that moment is therefore not to be viewed as a mere antiquarian pastime, but can prove to be of more enduring value.

Regarding the insights that literary theory allows into the study of history, a highly controversial topic, the book inspires slightly mixed feelings. On the one hand, when it can rely on what it does best, i.e., analyzing “literary” texts (including memoirs and autobiographies), the literary method proves of undoubted heuristic value, although its construction of inter-textuality is always in danger of being somewhat arbitrary and therefore problematic. On the other hand, when the analysis of printed texts has to be combined with the perusal of archival materials, as in the case of Gandhi’s South African episode, some of the limitations of the method become visible. One is nevertheless grateful to Banerjee for having retrieved from quasi-oblivion an archive of imperial citizenship well worth our attention. That the definition of citizenship cannot be entirely encompassed within the ambit of one particular nation-state is an idea that broadens our horizons and is potentially fruitful. There remains for the present time a challenge: how to be a “global” citizen, without being an “imperial” one.

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